



Parsi Tradition in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

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ABSTRACT

Rohinton Mistry's short stories explore the same themes that are exhaustively dealt in his novels. Most of his short stories provide us a peek into his longer fiction. These short stories were written by him during a period when his novels were still in origin form. While going through these short stories certain features are marked out which have been developed to the fullest extent in his longer fiction? However, certain other short stories are so captivating and powerful that a full length novel can be carved out of them. Rohinton Mistry's first major work, the collection of short stories *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is set in India. The residents of Firozsha Baag are mostly Parsis. In fact, the setting of *Tales from Firozsha Baag* reverses the situation of Parsi community in modern India. It presents with a search for personal and communal identity through the recollections of a homeland and responses to the immigrant's new world. Author explores both Canadian and Indian identities in the stories and then he pictures how these are created and destroyed, how they overlap and blend.

Parsis are the representatives of one of the oldest cultures of the globe and have influenced all cultures of world. The traditions and values practiced by this minority human group date back to centuries. The Parsis have survived all the odds due to flexibility inherent in their culture. The present research paper focuses on how Rohinton Mistry has portrayed the values and traditions of Parsi culture in his short stories. The focus shall also be on how Parsis have interacted with other communities in these short stories. Published in 1987, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a collection of eleven short stories which inter-related to each other and that explore the lives of Firozshahbaag Parsis apartment in Bombay. These stories include Parsis families and their problems which are

related to daily routine, desires, memory of past and present and rituals of Parsis. Along with this Mistry especially focuses on the Parsis, Parsi community and their small religious tradition, whose root is related to Zoroastrian and ancient Persia. Rohinton Mistry deals with the manner of social, cultural, moral and religious in the story of 'Auspicious Occasion', 'One Sunday', 'Condolence Visit', 'The Collectors', and 'Of White Hairs' and 'Cricket'. The middle class Parsi life describes in the story of 'Paying Guest', and 'Exercisers'. 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag' is the only story which deals in the non - Parsi point of view. All these stories based on the conflict between religious tradition and modernity in the life of Parsis.

There are some characters that reject Parsi tradition and follow modern customs as in 'Auspicious Occasion'. Mistry deals each tales with different subject matters like unmatched relationship of husband and wife, father-son, memory of past and present, Parsi tradition, parents-lover, hate and guilt, Canada and India. Mistry feels very sensitively about his community and he expresses his feelings through his characters in his fiction. He writes about fire-temple, tower of silence, Parsi costumes and Parsi food, Sudreh and Kusti, Parsi festivals like Behram roj and Parsi ceremonies like Novjote, wedding and death rituals and the world of the Parsis of Bombay within he grew up. Along with this Mistry also deals human feelings, ideas, passions, experience, joy sorrows and struggle in the life of Parsi community. The further subject of the story is the Diasporas nature of Parsis, and the whole books give an idea about autobiographical nature of Rohinton Mistry. There are many characters who try to prove their luck in western world like Canada and Toronto. The leading subject of the stories is all about Parsi and Bombay moreover a little bit about Toronto.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry put in the pictures of his experiences through his characters which he projects the inner and outer conflict of characters that how the community turn between the old ways of living and the new trends. There are many characters in these stories that reject the set norms of age old culture and traditions of Zoroastrianism. They show their learning towards growing materialism and modernity along with various other themes. These stories show how Parsi cultural heritages or their love for culture and social traditions is shifting its pattern from culture centered people to lovers of modernity. "Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of one-self within a process of tradition, in which past and present (self and other) are constantly fused (Gadamer 258)."

In the first story 'Auspicious Occasion' Mistry describes Behram roje, the Parsi New Year, which represents the Zoroastrian religious customs, their tastes and food habits. It also describes culture conditioning of Parsi but now the situations have changed with the trend for the modern family. "Mehroo was a little saddened when she thought of her own children, who did not give a second thought to these things; she had to coax them to finish the Chasni or it would sit for days, unnoticed and untouched. (14) Mistry makes observations about Parsi tradition, an orthodox Parsi family where Mehroo follows all the orthodox customs of her parent's family except staying in a separate room during unclean days. Rustomji who pretends to be apathetic to old age Parsi culture and rituals also enjoys all the important customs, rituals and prayers at Fire Temple.

All important days on the Parsi calendar, had the appropriate prayers and ceremonies performed at the fire-temple, and even set aside a room with an iron-frame bed and an iron stool for the women during their unclean time of the month (3). Whenever Mehroo thought of fire-temple she becomes nostalgic. She remembered how, as a child:

She would wait for her mother to return from the fire-temple so she could bury her face in her lap and breathe in the sandalwood smell. Her father's *dugli* gave off the same perfume, but her

mother's white sari was better, it felt so soft. Then there was the ritual of *Chasni*: all the brothers and sisters wearing their prayer caps would eagerly sit around the dining-table to partake of the fruit and sweet blessed during the day's prayers ceremonies (14).

Mehroo herself brush off and clean up because she would decorate the entrance of her flat with coloured chalk, hang up the tohrun and spread the fragrance of loban in her flat. But the maid does not come in the time and the occasion of festivals as Behram roje. She cooks dhandar-paatyo and saliboti special Parsi cuisine for the special occasion. For Mehroo *Behram roje* is a special day as:

... on *Behram roje* her mother had given birth to her at the Awabai Petit Parsi Lying-In Hospital; it was also the day her *Novjote* had been performed at the age of seven, when she was confirmed a Zoroastrian by the family priest, *Dustoor Dhunjisha* and finally, Rustomji had married her on *Behram roje* fourteen years ago, with feasting and celebration continuing into wee hours of the morning (4)

Mehroo celebrates *Behram roje* in the expected way but Rustomji has a different opinion because he thinks that all these customs are dead and meaningless. Rustomji does not believe in his religion from the core of his heart and he observes the customs and rituals for the sake of formality. This episode supports the view that changing attitude of people for their religion in particular Parsi community. The relationship between Parsis and Hindu is a motif shown in this story. Bharucha says that: "Most Parsis are rather isolationist and living in ethnic ghettos like Firozshahbaag only exacerbates this tendency. About the only contact most of them have had with their Hindu co-nationals, is through the domestic servants who work in their homes." (Bharucha)

'One Sunday' is the first story written by Mistry where he presents the real pictures of Parsi families and their way of living in the metropolitan city like Bombay which is related to problems of daily life and their realism. Mistry uses symbols of refrigerator used here as an apt symbol of community living and mutual co-operation among Parsis that fulfils the requirement of residents of Firozsha Baag. Najamai the sole owner of the refrigerator in the Baag indicates the economic condition of the Parsis. The fridge shows that the Parsi co-operates their society in any ways. Mistry brings to light the depth of human psychology to point out that necessity is an effective cause of social unity.

'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag' is a story of the Parsi culture and social traditions made by a non-Parsi narrator, Jacqueline, the ayah. She is a Catholic Christian who is wholeheartedly devoted to her religion and makes observations about Parsi Zoroastrianism. The narrator herself is a ghost; she uses Hindi, Parsi and Konkani words in the story which give a realistic touch to it. According to some post-colonial critics language is power language. How the words change their pronunciation when they are used by the speakers of other languages 'easy chair', 'igeechur' French beans was *ferach beech* and Jacqueline became Jaaykalee. It is common in all old Parsis and they make their own private language. However, the narrator is an illiterate ayah even then she feels the pangs of displacement from Goa to Bombay. But she settle to all this with finding a job in Bombay. Language is considered to be the identity of a person. Holliday defines: "Language creates reality and therefore its categories of content cannot be defined, since we could define them only by relating them to some pre-existing model of experience, and there is no model of experience until the linguistic categories are there to model it. (Holliday)"

Being a Catholic Christian presents the Parsi culture and traditions and comments upon their thinking, view points and opinions on various issues frankly. The narrator also observes the changing

dressingsense among Parsis. Though the conventional Parsi ladies wear saris but that has been replaced for ultra modern girls of Firozsha Baag who have started wearing “high heel shoes” and “mini skirt”, the narrator makes a comment “Very *esskey-messkey*, so short I don’t know how their *mai-baap* allowed it” (47). Mistry presents the views that human behaviour in all religions and faiths have some common features.

The story ‘Condolence Visit’ presents the old Parsi tradition is graphically depicted in the story. The word condolence symbolizes the solace and peace for the family members of demised, but it enhances the pain when people come without sympathy and just for the sake of formality. The traditions and rituals related to death in Parsi community are elaborated in the present story. The term *Dushmoo*, tenth day after the funeral which is observed in fire temple and the ‘*maosiso*’ means a month after the last rite are elaborated with their worth in the story. Daulat, widow to Minocher Mirza has to repeat the details of his illness. However, the people come to the family of the demised person to share their grief and owe sympathy but here the story explores the inner feelings of widow whose husband has died recently after a long illness. She comments on condolence visits, “The worst of it would be the repetition of details for different visitors at different hours on different days” (60) that multiplies the sufferings of the family members.

The development of story shows her attachment for her dying husband Minocher. Here the situation is highlighted that she could not bear the visitors who come propels by “custom and conventions”. Sarosh, the Canadian immigrant brings her a portable cassette tape recorder from Canada, she refused to accept it saying that “Poor Minocher sick in bed, and I listen to music?” (71). Here cassette recorder symbolizes the modern man and his insensitivity. The “R-button” shows his memory literally mean Rewind and memorize and “FF button” means “Fast Forward” expresses the how people feel bored towards the sufferings of others. The button ‘P’ stands for “Pause”. If you wish to stop the expression of someone’s sufferings then stop with button-P. So the cassette recorder here becomes the powerful symbol of modern man who shows his condolences only for the sake of social formality. But later on she apologizes upon her decision not to accept that portable cassette tape recorder and that exposes the irony of human situation. She realizes that how superficially people visit her in the name of condolence and she has to give full detail of Minocher’s illness like a mechanical tool. The widow Daulat Mirza wishes to leave Firozsha Baag to avoid these frequent condolence visits but she fears that it would generate active gossip in the society. These customary visits highlight the relative effect of pathos and sympathy for Daulat. Thus, the story touches the various aspects of Parsi life, their culture and customs particularly related to funeral and after funeral rites.

‘The Collectors’ as the title indicates, it revolves around the hobby of stamps collection but reveals the various aspects of life. The story set in Firozsha Baag presents the view of Microcosm of Parsi world and reflects the behaviour of residents particularly Mody and Bulsara families. The story presents the ironical view of Dr. Mody who gets respect and has the reputation of a thorough gentleman, but has to face humiliation due to his son Pesi. No doubt, people respect him heartily but they cannot tolerate his son to spoil their children and provoke them to do wrong deeds.

The story reflects various colours of life with the keen observations of a story teller. Dr. Mody who was an educated person and had the elite status in Parsi community and outside his community also follows the practices of Parsism. He wears ‘White Payajama’, ‘Sudra’ and ‘a huge pair of Sapaat’ at home. Mrs. Bulsara with her *mathoobanoo* represents the conventional Parsi woman and believes in God to the core of her heart. She occasionally asserts the phrases *Khoedai salaamat raakhe* and *Khoedai* are great which are great which reveals her deep faith in the existence of God and her religion. When Dr. Mody dies, his body is brought to Bombay from Ahmadabad for a proper Parsi

funeral. When Dr. Mody first time came in the Baag he felt very happy to think that he would live amidst of his own community as reported by Mrs. Mody after his death. It is noteworthy that the Parsis follow their set traditions and rituals to the great extent. When the dead body of Dr. Mody was brought, people talked, "Poor Dr. Mody never went a day without a bath and talcum powder in life" (99).

The story around the life of a Parsi family and shows a sense of belongingness. It is presented how a father dreams about a successful future for his son. He desires his son to be always tough and congratulate his son on performing well, "today my son did a brave thing, as I would have done. A powerful shot was going to the boundary, like a canon ball, and he blocked it with his bare shin"(130) The bright future or dream job thought by a father for his son as revealed in the story is to migrate to a western country as Mr. Boyce says, " And one day, you must go, too, to America. No future here (136). It isn't easy to meet the expenses of routine life for a lower middle class family but even then the father promise his son," Somehow we'll get the money to send you. I'll find a way" (136)

The writer explores some of the important Parsi customs and rituals directly and indirectly such as Sacred "Bhikha Behram Well" which symbolizes the value of purity in Parsi public life. The narrator makes a pertinent comment upon the way of Parsi worship, "there wasn't a blazing fire because hardly any sandalwood offerings had been left in the silver thaali: most people came only at the holy days" (113). The people do not visit fire temple daily now. It reveals that the people have no time to go to fire temples. But the person who follows the Parsi tradition gets respect in the society. The Parsi households make 'Kusti' at home having a grace of its own.

In the story Of White Hairs and Cricket, Mistry informs the readers that thread for Kusti, which is worn by every Parsi, is spun at home. In this story this job is done by mamaji. Thus, the story gives an overview of struggling middle class society in a Parsi apartment. The narrator thinks about his friend's family and then about his own parents and mamaji and how much his elders struggle to earn a livelihood and run a family in this world.

The story 'Exercisers' begins with the modern problem of the Parsi family of Mr. and Mrs. Bulsara about their son Jahangir. According to Parsi tradition inter-faith marriages are prohibited in Parsism but the story expose the situation that Parsi parents feel too insecure to accept even a Parsi girl of their son's choice. The story presents the realistic picture of a Parsi family where the parents are over conscious about their children but their children do not like security cover.

Mistry describes the continuous struggle between tradition and modernity, according to the western culture. Parsi who have trying to keep their cultural heritages intact since their persecution from Iran but in the modern times, it is a matter of great apprehensions how they do mistaken about their customs and becomes modern under the superiority of western culture. It raises a question on cultural and identity of the whole Parsi community.

Three stories namely 'Squatter', 'Lend Me Your Light' and 'Swimming Lessons,' have Canadian setting. These stories deal with problems of immigrant experiences. All the three stories are collectively discussed to show their connectivity they possess. The narrative in the story 'Squatter' is a story within a story, narrator by Nariman Hansotia, the famous story teller of Firozsha Baag. Sarosh already being introduced in the story 'Condolence Visit', as a nephew of Daulat and Minocher, and three months after the wedding, Sarosh with his wife emigrated to Canada and they divorced a year later because "she did not like it in Canada"(68). Sarosh calls himself Sid in Toronto but while narrating the story Nariman prefers calling him Sarosh as it is his 'proper Parsi name'. Nariman makes

an effort to reclaim Sarosh's identity which he lost in Toronto by calling himself Sid, a western identity:

Whatever else may be the influence of the British environment on the Indians, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants and their children, their names will not be radically altered . . . Jagjit may become Jock or Sundri become Sandra, for ease of speech - but the essence will remain. This is likely to happen in the whole socio-cultural makeup of the Asian community. (Hiro 132)

Living in an alien land Sarosh finds the miserable and depressed because he could not adjust himself upon the white plastic oval of the toilet seat. Sarosh passed through the problematic relationship between inter-locking cultural landscapes, between an ethnic heritage and new life in the West. It is due to his squatting problem he often become late for work and warned by his supervisor. Sarosh is not interested in taking such a drastic step. His squatting failure means he found himself unable to adapt the western culture. He could not assimilate to the new surroundings. His task of assimilation and his inability to accomplish the desired transformation can only be seen as a sign of failure: "If he could not be westernized in all respects, he was nothing but The transformation takes place and an individual wishes to separate from her/his roots: a failure in this land – a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere" (162).

A new type of personality, namely a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of the distinct peoples; never quite willing to break . . . with his parts and his traditions, and quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in a society in which he [seek] to find a place (Park 892). Finally, Sarosh succeeded in his task during his return journey to his homeland. Sarosh narrates his failure story as an immigrant to Nariman so that he could narrate the story for the boys of Firozsha Baag, especially those who are planning to go abroad.

The story 'Lend Me Your Light' begins with an epigraph from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* ". . . Your lights are all lit-then where do you go with your lamp? My house is all dark and lonesome, lend me your light." The Diasporic writers suffering could be analyzed through the words of Tagore. The story revolves around three characters Jamshed, Percy and Kersi. Mistry gives information about his Indian and Canadian experiences from his childhood days till his immigration. The narrator of the story finds himself caught between two worlds, one which he left (Bombay) and the second which he adopted (Canada). The author explores the minds of the immigrants who plan to shift themselves to their dreamlands with high hopes but cannot forget their cultural roots and childhood experiences of their native land. Majority of the Parsi characters take immigration positively as an opportunity and blessings for bright future but not all the Parsis react identically. Nariman Hansotia, Sarosh's mother, and Percy Boyce are some exceptions who do not give much importance to immigration. The Parsis think that they are refined human beings in comparison to other Indians. They have a sense of racial discrimination but it does not mean that they do not love India. They think that they have a westernized background but at the same time they take a strong pride in their mother land.

'Swimming Lessons' is the last story in the anthology. It reflects the deep impact of immigration and nostalgia on the awareness of the protagonist. Mistry focuses upon the situation of Parsis in Canada where they are considered as a part of the Asian race. The confusion of being the most westernized community disappears in the swimming classes. It deals with the question of identity in the 'mosaic' of multicultural of a small community of India - the Parsis. It also highlights the cultural attachment and longing for tradition in an alien land where he himself feels a complete stranger. The writer reveals the position of Parsis in relation to international categorization of human being. Uma parmeswaram makes a comment upon the position of immigrant:

In the immigrant context, one might say that minorities, especially, have to fight for both the erasure of a negative identity pre-given by the power group and the forging of a positive identity. In the process, they are often transformed into an uneasy hybrid condition of non-belonging in both homelands (Parmeswaram 35).

The story is the presentation of mundane life of common Parsis of Firozsha Baag. The Parsis have strong patriotic feeling and ethnic bonds in their blood and behaviour. They have rich cultural and historical roots which are being preserved by them in one way or the other. In the twenty first century, they are confused about their ancient culture and traditions which clashes with modernity. The story reflects the experiences of the Parsi immigrant with penetrative vision and detailed powerful imagery and symbol to reveals the inner most feeling of temptation, attraction and charms of Western developed country which prove shallow and transitory on a close examination. In this story, Mistry also shows the position of Parsis in the international context. He also touches the sensitive human issues such as Diasporic consciousness, family values, ethical values and importance of culture and traditions and their decay in his stories. Mistry having the agenda to preserve the Parsi culture and tradition plays the role of whistle blower against the defects which are creep in the Parsi culture and tradition.

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